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AUTHOR Cronin, Michael
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a vareity of individual, group, and organizational communication skills for dealing with job burnout. Primary emphasis is placed on techniques for: (1) gaining perspective; (2) resolving substantive and affective conflict; (3) developing social support systems; and (4) increasing constructive feedback and employee control. Twenty-four references are attached. (KEH)

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WORKSHOP: COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES FOR COPING WITH JOB BURNOUT

Dr. Michael Cronin,
Professor, Speech
Communication
Radford University
Radford, Virginia 24142

Specialist in public, group, interpersonal communication; Burnout Consultant for government, business and private organizations.

Burnout causes major problems for both individuals and organizations. The author advocates approaching the prevention and treatment of burnout from a combination of individual, group and organizational perspectives. In each area, the communication skills necessary to prevent or reduce burnout are presented. Primary emphasis is placed on techniques for: gaining perspective, resolving substantive and affective conflict, developing social support systems and increasing constructive feedback and employee control.

In ancient China, the symbol for stress included two written characters - one for danger and one for opportunity. Stress can be helpful or harmful depending upon its intensity, frequency and upon how it is mediated. Unmediated stress is "the number one health problem in the U.S. today." (Cedoline, p. 4)

Burnout is one of the problems resulting from unmediated stress. If a previously committed individual experiences physical and emotional exhaustion centered around his work brought on by unrelieved demands (internal or external; positive or negative), he is experiencing burnout. Burnout is a loss of will, motivation, idealism, moral purpose or commitment at work. You can't burn out if you have never been on fire. Overcommitted individuals are most likely to experience the gradual process of detachment or disengagement from work brought on by an imbalance between resources and demands. The greater the consequences of failure to meet demands, the greater the distress. Dr. Edward Stambaugh, a practicing clinical psychologist who specializes in treating job burnout victims, estimates that as many as 10 percent of Americans succumb to the effects of burnout every year. (Cedoline, p. 17) A recent survey of 9,000 workers from 21 organizations conducted by Robert Golembiewski, management professor at the University of Georgia, reports that 15 percent were moderately burned out and that 45 percent felt high levels of emotional exhaustion. (USA Today, Dec. 23, 1985, p. 1D)

The most common symptoms of job burnout include:

1) A loss of feeling and concern for ones co-workers. Poor peer and group relationships and withdrawal from or irritability with co-workers.

2) Detachment with clients, failure to initiate contact with clients; labeling clients as objects; or offering short or rude answers to clients.

3) Diminished frustration tolerance in carrying out job responsibilities.

4) Increasing rigidity on the job.

5) Negative job attitudes including constant complaining, cynicism, irritability, moodiness, and paranoia.

6) Lack of energy on the job. Less effectiveness at work due to apathy, carelessness, emotional exhaustion, clockwatching, tardiness and absenteeism.

7) Questioning ones career goals and decisions.

8) Increasing disorientation including forgetfulness, low concentration, stumbling speech patterns.

9) Physical problems are several times as frequent in burnout victims. Such problems include illness, headaches, backaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, allergies, sleep problems. (Veninga, p. 109)

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10) Increased problems off the job including excessive eating, drinking or drugs, decreased social contacts, marital discord.

The consequences to the individual are often synonomous with the symptomology. Burnout is also exceptionally debilitating to the organization. It has been linked with high personnel turnover, friction with both co-workers and supervisors and increased dissatisfaction with both the job and the unit. Burnout has been linked with job withdrawal, decreases in productivity and absenteeism. (Jackson, p. 61)

The prevention and treatment of burnout assume increasing importance as we become more aware of the debilitating consequences for both individuals and organizations. Clearly prevention is better and cheaper than treatment. The prevention and treatment of burnout are best handled by utilizing a combination of individual, group and organizational approaches. Two recent studies indicate that individual coping alone is less effective in dealing with job-related strain than a combined approach. (Farber, p. 237) The best coper analyzes each situation as unique and adapts the most effective strategy to that situation. The complexity of causation for burnout requires avoidance of a narrow perspective in dealing with the problem. Approaching coping only from a perspective of management training, biofeedback, relaxation therapy, etc. is generally too limited. (Farber, pp. 15-17) However, since the role of communication training in combatting job burnout has received little attention in the literature, this paper will examine a variety of individual, group and organizational communication skills for dealing with job burnout.

ARE YOU BURNING OUT?

All individuals experience one or more of these symptoms occasionally. The key to recognizing burnout lies in identifying the frequency and severity of the symptomology. Several scholars have developed tests for job burnout. Take the following test. Try to be honest with yourself.

Look back over the past six months. Have you been noticing changes in yourself or in the world around you? Think of the office. . .the family. . .social situations. Allow about 30 seconds for each answer. Then assign it a number from 1 (for no or little change) to 5 (for a great deal of change) to designate the degree of change you perceive.

1) Do you tire more easily? Feel fatigued rather than energetic?

2) Are people annoying you by telling you, "You don't look so good lately"?

3) Are you working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less?

4) Are you increasingly cynical and disenchanted?

5) Are you often invaded by a sadness you can't explain?

6) Are you forgetting? (appointments, deadlines, personal possessions)

7) Are you increasingly irritable? More short-tempered? More disappointed in the people around you?

8) Are you seeing close friends and family members less frequently?

9) Are you too busy to do even routine things like make phone calls or read reports or send out your Christmas cards?

10) Are you suffering from physical complaints? (aches, pains, headaches, a lingering cold)

11) Do you feel disoriented when the activity of the day comes to a halt?

12) Is joy elusive?

13) Are you unable to laugh at a joke about yourself?

14) Does sex seem like more trouble than its worth?

15) Do you have very little to say to people?

Very roughly, now, place yourself on the Burn-Out scale. Keep in mind that this is merely an approximation of where you are, useful as a guide on your way to a more satisfying life. Don't let a high total alarm you, but pay attention to it. Burn-Out is reversible, no matter how far along it is. The higher number signifies that the sooner you start being kinder to yourself, the better.

THE BURN-OUT SCALE

0-25 You're doing fine.

26-35 There are things you should be watching.

36-50 You're a candidate.

51-65 You are burning out.

INDIVIDUAL COPING METHODS

Realign Your Perceptions

One's perceptions of self, co-workers, clients, and the job are major factors in causing or combatting burnout. Our perceptions of self often affect our distress. Develop your self-esteem by seeking positive feedback, using positive self talk, doing things you do well, and focusing on what you have done well at the end of the day.

Burnout victims often accentuate the negative about themselves and eliminate the positive. The typical burnout was a successful, motivated, committed, valued, and idealistic worker. These positive qualities are often devalued or ignored by the burnout, viewing the world through distress-colored glasses. Anger, helplessness, hopelessness, frustration, cynicism, negative job attitudes, apathy, a sense of worthlessness, etc., dominate the consciousness of a burnout victim.

We play a large role in controlling our burnout. It is often more appropriate to use a mirror instead of a telescope in analyzing burnout. "We cannot expect others to make things better for us, but we can make them better for ourselves." (Maurice, p. 36) We can avoid or reduce the powerless thinking that inflames burnout by changing our appraisals or by reinterpreting the data.

1) Don't set unattainable goals. Eliminate deadwood demands, and develop realistic expectations of what you have to achieve. Train yourself to set realistic goals. (Pines, p. 162)

2) Avoid social comparison. Develop a realistic personal definition of success and failure. (Pines, pp. 147-148)

3) Take a more detached view of yourself on the job. Step back and mentally observe you or someone else doing your job.

4) Analyze your present job and realistic alternatives. Perhaps the grass is greener at your present job. Learn to appreciate what you have. On the other hand, do not be afraid to change jobs or locations.

5) Put distance between yourself and your job. Do not make your self-concept too dependent on your occupation lest any criticism of your work "becomes a rejection of who you are rather than what you have done." (Freudenberger, p. 176)

6) Take primary responsibility for yourself and your job. Get out of the habit of blaming others for your problems. If things are not going well on the job, analyze <u>your</u> role in problem creation. Try to do things because you <u>choose</u> to rather than because you <u>ought</u> to. Try to delete "I <u>can't</u> from your vocabulary and replace it with "I <u>won't</u>." Using language like "I choose" and "I won't" places primary responsibility for your behavior on you. Changing the way you relate to others is much easier than changing others. You can make things better for yourself if you resist self-defeating perceptions of helplessness and hopelessness.

"We do not believe that people can take complete control of their perceptions of stress and thereby render every form of work stress powerless. For millions of people, the best, perhaps the only option, is to change the stress itself. However, we believe that most people can make significant changes in their perceptual practices. We can consider other possible definitions of the situation. And, if successful, it can give us dramatic and lasting relief from work stress." (Veninga, p. 91) D. H. Lawrence described the perceptual practices of one of his characters: "Poor Richard Lovatt worried himself to death; struggling with the problem of himself and calling it Australia." (Lawrence, pp. 129-130) Many a burnout has struggled with the problem of himself and called it the job, the boss, the client, or the co-worker. To paraphrase Thoreau, as long as a burnout mismanages his perceptions, he is apt to mismanage everything else. Burnout victims frequently exhibit a distorted view of reality. They must learn to define problems and situations more accurately since the terminology of the question often determines the answer.

Burnouts must also learn that the personal and projective nature of their

perceptions determine their definitions of reality.

Listen Empathically

Active empathic listening is often helpful in combatting occupational burnout. The average person spends approximately 40 percent of his waking day listening. However, over "30 years of research clearly indicates that we listen at approximately 25% effectiveness and efficiency." (Steil, p. 38) Research supporting the importance of listening is rapidly expanding. Wolvin, pp. 21-22 and Steil, pp. 9-10 cite studies of listening in business that conclude:

1) Active listening is the most critical managerial competency. (Smith, 1978)

2) Poor listening is the number one communication barrier for first-line supervisors. (Smeltzer, 1979)

3) Listening is the most important communication skill. (Carstens, 1979)

4) Effective listening is the most important communication skill necessary for entry level positions in various occupational contexts. (DiSalvo, 1980)

5) Listening skills are the most important communication skills for career competence. (Muchmore and Galvin, 1983)

6) Failure to listen was ranked as the second most critical problem that distinguishes ineffective from effective subordinates. (Downs and Conrad, 1982)

7) Ineffective listening leads to ineffective performance or low productivity. (Hunt and Cusella, 1983)

Effective listening is difficult for most people; it is much more difficult for an individual experiencing burnout. Professional problems, anxiety, and closed-mindedness have been identified as major factors that inhibit listening success. (Steil, p. 59; Wolvin, p. 106) Poor peer and group relationships, withdrawal from or irritability with co-workers, detachment from clients, diminished frustration tolerance, increasing rigidity, cynicism, apathy, emotional exhaustion, disorientation, moodiness, and physical problems compound listening problems for burnout victims.

Distortion of reality is often associated with job burnout. Effective listening is essential to reduce distortion of reality. One approach to increasing listening efficiency is the avoidance of bad listening habits. Do not decide in advance that the subject is uninteresting. Listen carefully before you evaluate. Do not criticize the communicator's manner of delivery. Try to understand the message no matter how poorly it is presented. Try to listen for the main ideas of the message rather than concentrating on the facts only. Do not allow yourself to fake attention to the speaker or allow your mind to wander during a discussion. Do not create distractions while listening or engage in premature evaluation. If you wish to evaluate, remember that your evaluation will be more meaningful if it is withheld until comprehension is as complete as possible.

Empathic listening is the key to comprehension. "In schools where listening is taught, listening comprehension has as much as doubled in a few months." (Steil, p. 6)

Avoid Blindering in Defining Problems

> "Definitions are limiting. Limitations are deadening. To limit oneself is a kind of suicide."
>
> (Robbins, p. 333)

Our perception of problems inevitably involves abstraction. We may, unconsciously, impose restrictions on solutions by our definition of the problem.

> One's definition (i.e., his interpretation, size up, perception, appraisal, and so on) of a problem greatly influences his attempts at solving the problem. But a definition is inevitably an abstraction, a leaving out of details. If, then, in defining a problem, one is unaware that he is leaving out details (especially if they are important or vital details), he is in danger of becoming blindered -- of unconsciously permitting his narrowed perception to restrict his attack on the problem. The basic correctives are (1) to remember that definitions inevitably involve the exclusion of details (perhaps crucial ones) and (2) to recognize

and remove one's blinders. (Nancy, p. 473)

Distinguish Fact from Inference

"A brief written presentation that winnows fact from opinion is the basis for decision making around here." (Ed Harness former chairman, of Procter and Gamble cited in Peters, p. 151)

Dr. Bruce A. Baldwin, a practicing psychologist, reports that:

> The absence of this fundamental skill is the root of much emotional upset, worry and personal grief. Most of it is entirely unwarranted. With obvious tongue-in-cheek, Mark Twain once commented: "My life has been full of misfortunes. . .most of which never happened." In other words, do not waste your time and emotional energy worrying or getting upset about something that has not happened or that you do not know for a fact. Instead, trust in your ability to deal with problems as they arise. Avoid making assumptions, especially negative ones, about events. Do not jump to conclusions. When you do, you make the problem bigger, more emotionally threatening and overwhelming in proportion to your resources. By dealing only with facts, you respond to a practical problem that is known. As you learn this skill, you will find your confidence increasing and your "worry factor" on the wane. (Baldwin, p. 14)

Burnout victims are likely to have a distorted view of reality because they often act upon their inferences as if they were the facts of a situation. Assumptions about co-workers, the job, superiors' motives, reasons for people's behavior, etc., are treated as fact. Inferences involve mental leaps from the known to the unknown; as such, they must be viewed as less certain than direct observations.

ORGANIZATIONAL COPING METHODS

Institute Training Programs

Organizations can confront and combat job burnout through training programs. Each organization should compare its specific needs with the range of training programs and professional consultants available. Occupational burnout has many causes and many symptoms. (Farber, p. 246) The most effective approach is to tailor burnout training to the primary needs of the specific organization. Some training programs present individual coping methods without addressing group and organizational factors. Some social scientists emphasize social support methods (group) without adequate treatment of individual and organizational coping methods. Some training addresses only organizational coping and downplays, or omits, individual and group approaches. Some trainers approach burnout only from the narrow perspective of their professional specialty, i.e., relaxation therapy, biofeedback, management training, etc. These narrow approaches generally have limited impact in reducing job burnout.

Larger organizations may find it desirable to develop their own training programs for occupational burnout. (Edelwich and Brodsky offer excellent training guidelines in Paine, pp. 133-153.) Retain outside experts to provide specific resources but not to conduct the overall program. Organizational training should be structured by intensive study to answer the question: What kind(s) of burnout intervention should be offered by what kind(s) of individuals, aimed at what target(s), with what purpose(s), with what effects on the individual, work setting, and organization? (Farber, pp. 244-245)

It is crucial to avoid a one-shot approach to training. (Edelwich and Brodsky in Paine, p. 142) Follow up on results and institute additional training or refresher courses. Do not expect burnout to vanish following even a well-planned training program.

Increase Constructive Feedback

Employees often complain that their boss is too negative or never tells them what he feels. Spend part of each staff meeting or employee conference on positive feedback. Work hard to provide regular and sufficient constructive feedback on employee performance. Effective feedback reduces the anomie, feelings of hopelessness, and lack of of control that often cause job burnout. Pines has found in several studies that the amount of information regarding successes and performance level received by employees was "significantly and negatively correlated with burnout. . . . The more feedback received from supervisors and administrators, the less burnout." (Pines in Paine, p. 204)

Develop a systematic method within the organization to ensure that employees know that their contributions are appreciated. "People need information that supports their positive self-images, eases their concerns, and refuels them psychologically." (Levinson, p. 79) An article in the Harvard Business Review presents a serious indictment of many organizational efforts to provide feedback.

> Many compensation and performance appraisal programs actually contribute to people's sense that their efforts will be unrecognized, no matter how well they do. Organizational structures and processes that inhibit timely attacks on problems and delay competitive actions actually produce much of the stress that people experience at work. If top executives fail to see that organizational factors can cause burnout, their lack of understanding may perpetuate the problem. (Levinson, p. 79)

Many supervisors avoid feedback to (and from) employees as much as possible. They proudly assert to employees, "If you don't hear anything, you must be doing okay."

CONCLUSION

Burnout is debilitating to individuals and organizations. A burnout victim can utilize effective communication to rise from his/her own ashes, like the legendary phoenix, and return to a satisfying and productive career given sufficient group and organizational support.

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